

MINISTERIAL ETHICS WHEN LEAVING A CONGREGATION
Guidelines for Congregational Leaders

In the church we frequently talk about the relationship between pastor and people as one of “family” and, especially when pastoral relationships are long, affection runs deep between a congregation and the pastor who has been with them during times of crisis and of joy. It can be difficult for church members to understand that the relationship must change significantly when a pastor leaves his or her position, and that they must share their faith journey with another pastor whom God has called to fill that role. If the minister’s transition is to retirement, it can be especially difficult for one who has devoted so much of his or her life to this vocation. As retirement is challenging for all working people, it is more so in a profession where work and identity are so closely bound. These realities urge all who are planning toward a farewell—the pastor, the congregation’s leaders, and the presbytery—to be particularly attentive to the challenges of saying goodbye well.

This Presbytery recognizes that there are potentially difficult situations involving the relationship of a minister to his or her former congregation. The Ministerial Committee provides these guidelines as a means of assisting both pastors and congregations to avoid awkward situations, maintain the church’s ethical standards, and encourage new pastoral relationships that will be established.

The ending of a pastoral relationship sometimes is a trying and traumatic experience and it always means change both in the life of the pastor and his or her family, as well as in the life of the congregation.

When a pastor leaves a congregation, there are bonds of affection between the minister and members of the church, which continue to be cherished. While relations of friendship may continue, the pastoral relationship does not.

When a pastor leaves a church, he or she leaves not only a professional relationship, but also an emotional and communal support group. Some folks will have become personal friends - golf buddies, bridge partners, social companions. Beyond that, some will have developed emotional ties...good old pastor J married us and baptized our children. Pastor J conducted Dad’s funeral (and we want [expect] him or her to conduct Mother’s funeral).

When a new pastor moves onto the field, he or she expects to find a new community of people with whom she or he can work, build new relationships, and find friends. The problem that evolves has to do with leaving what is past and allowing a congregation to move into its future. Both congregations and individuals have a sense of hope for future under the leadership of a new pastor – but that is often coupled with a degree of sadness and nostalgia at the departure of a well-loved pastor.

MINISTERIAL ETHICS WHEN LEAVING A CONGREGATION
Guidelines for Congregational Leaders
(continued)

A Pastoral Reflection on the Challenges of Transition

When a meaningful pastoral relationship ends, there is often the impulse both on the part of departing pastor and congregation, to “not let go”. While usually motivated by positive thoughts and feelings, trying to ‘hang on’ to a pastoral relationship that has officially ended can be very damaging to a congregation:

- The pastoral relationship is based on clear boundaries and mutual trust. When a departing pastor continues to be involved in pastoral duties without the invitation of the incoming pastor, suddenly there is a question in people’s minds: “Is the ‘official’ pastor the ‘real’ pastor?” “Perhaps we will listen to the ‘official’ pastor preach but if we need weddings or funerals or counseling or input on the direction of the church, we will quietly go to the ‘real’ pastor, the one we’ve known.” This undermines the trust that is so essential in a healthy pastoral relationship.
- Jesus once told his disciples when they were afraid of him leaving: “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the [Holy Spirit] will not come to you...(John 16:7). The beginning of a new pastorate represents the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of a congregation. It is a time for a congregation to let go of a previous chapter of their life in order to follow the guidance of the Spirit into a new chapter. The greatest gift an outgoing pastor can give to the congregation is to make room for the work of the Holy Spirit by his or her absence. When an outgoing pastor continues--casually or intentionally--to give input on the direction of the church, this encourages the congregation to remain “stuck”—and undermines not only the leadership of the new pastor but the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.
- When an outgoing pastor, uninvited by new pastor and session, continues to exert influence of whatever kind in the life of a congregation, the membership will begin to ‘take sides’, some with the ‘old’ pastor, others with the ‘new’ pastor. The result is increasing divisiveness in a transitional time when unity is so important. In the worst cases, this can lead to church splits and/or the premature departure of a new pastor, leaving a legacy of guilt and hostility for the congregation’s future.

The support given by an outgoing pastor to a new pastoral relationship can be a true gift to a congregation, as difficult as it may be at first. The inappropriate involvement of a departed pastor in the life of a congregation, however, can cause great pain, divisiveness and damage.

The congregation’s leaders—both the minister and the members of the session - bear responsibility to inform and interpret to the congregation of the professional boundaries that pastors strive to honor as the pastoral relationship concludes. It is important that the departing pastor make it clear that the relationship of pastor to people will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but there is a special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from becoming confused with the pastoral relationship.

MINISTERIAL ETHICS WHEN LEAVING A CONGREGATION
Guidelines for Congregational Leaders
(continued)

General Guidelines

These guidelines are important whenever a pastoral relationship concludes, but are particularly critical when a pastor retires.

1. Affirming the value of absence, a pastor without a call to another congregation should seek to find a new church home whenever possible. In communities where the congregation served is the only Presbyterian church there, pastors and their families should seek other places to worship during the congregation's time of transition to new leadership.
2. If relating to another church is impossible, a former pastor should limit his or her activity and seek to redefine his or her role in that particular church.
3. A former pastor should firmly, but in a positive and caring way, tell the congregation that he or she will not participate in a leadership role in any activity or special services in the church.
4. A former pastor and family continuing to live in the community will have many personal ties. It is appropriate and necessary that those relationships continue. It is incumbent upon that former pastor and family to refrain zealously from discussing the church, changes that are taking place, and other items of church life. This obligation is especially important to guard in informal settings common to conversations among friends.
5. The former pastor is strongly encouraged to participate in weddings, funerals and baptisms involving members of the church after the date of dissolution only by invitation of the moderator of Session. A departing pastor should have as his or her first concern the impact this participation would have on the quality of the relationship between the current or future pastor and the life and ministry of the congregation.
6. Any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the departing pastor, but with the interim pastor or subsequent installed pastor.
7. Normally, invitations to the departing pastor to be part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation should not occur until the installed pastor has had an opportunity to establish relationships with the congregation.
8. With the guidance of the Ministerial Committee, the Session needs to be firm in declaring to the people that former pastors may not participate in a leadership role in the church. With the guidance of the Ministerial Committee, the Session needs to set the guidelines for the departing pastor and assist him or her in interpreting them to the congregation and to the community.
9. Ordinarily, requests from Sessions to grant a former pastor the status of Pastor Emeritus will not be considered by Ministerial Committee immediately at the point of retirement.
10. The Ministerial Committee welcomes and encourages consultation with former pastors or with Sessions should questions or concerns arise.